

# Parent-School Partnerships: Forked Roads to College Access

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## Abstract

This article utilizes a social capital perspective to explore the benefits and harmful effects of strong ties between parents and schools in enhancing college access for students. While focusing on social capital in the form of parental participation, the article goes beyond a functionalist approach of the social capital theory as adopted by Coleman, whereby the social networks within parent groups and between parents and teachers are viewed as providing common positive outcomes for everyone in the school. Instead, while acknowledging the inherent advantages of parent-school social networks, the article looks at social capital theory from a conflict framework wherein ends are not the same for everyone in the school body. This review thereby discusses how different groups of parents compete for power to define schools' functions. In the process, some powerful groups of parents enjoying strong social capital can lead schools to take actions that neither benefit the school as a whole, nor are they in the interest of children whose parents do not share the same social relationships. The review, therefore, argues for treating groups of parents differently instead of uniformly as one homogenous entity, based on their varying levels of social capital vis-à-vis schools.

Key Words: parental involvement, social networks, school transformation, college access, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status

## Introduction

More and more children in the United States yearn for pursuing higher education in colleges, yet many are unable to realize their desires. A closer look at research data reveals that students of color and lower socioeconomic status are largely under-represented in the institutions of higher studies (Choy, 2001). This article explores and extends the possibility that an underlying reason for such disadvantages inheres in the patterns and quality of social relationships that the parents of these children have with their respective schools. The parental factor is now being recognized as one of the important factors determining students' access to college. Research has shown strong linkages between the participation (and its absence) of parents in schools, their children's scholastic performance, and the eventual probability of their access to college (Auerbach, 2002; Choy; McDonough, 1994, 1997).

This article utilizes a social capital perspective to first discuss how strong parental participation can lead to a reduction in the dropout rates of students and to enhancing their chances of making it to college (Coleman, 1988). However, while it is plausible to discern a strong positive link between parental participation and college access for children, there is a need to balance this optimistic conception with the possibility that a strong interference from parents can reduce the autonomy of schools, thereby acting as a liability for some other groups of children whose parents are not as influential. The present review discusses some cases where powerful groups of parents have played a role in resisting school reform processes to the extent of reducing the chances of college access for students from disadvantaged minority and socioeconomic backgrounds. Thus, this article brings out a *dark side* of social capital that may emanate from strong parental participation in schools.

I argue for the need to go beyond the functionalist approach of the social capital theory adopted by Coleman, whereby the social networks within parent groups and between parents and teachers are viewed as a source of common positive outcomes for everyone in the school. As a contrasting perspective on the supposed advantages of parent-school social networks, I look at the social capital theory from a conflict framework wherein ends are not the same for everyone in the school body. I examine the role of social capital in facilitating selective transfer of information, acquisition and control of scarce resources in the form of college prep classes, and the selective coagulation of power to define and control the appropriate functions and outcomes of schools. In this paper, I engage a competing concept of social capital developed by Bourdieu (1985) whereby social capital is seen as a tool for reproduction of the dominant class. I explore how different groups of parents compete for power to define a

school's function. In the process, some powerful groups of parents who have strong networks with schools influence actions that are not necessarily in the interest of the school at large. This review, therefore, argues for treating groups of parents differently, instead of uniformly as one homogenous entity.

The arguments developed here are partially guided by the tradition of critical theory of looking at the unequal consequences of schooling and how it, though intending to educate all, can benefit certain groups of students to the detriment of others through various processes (Apple, 1986, 1995; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Collins, 1971; Giroux, 1981, 1989, 1992).

### **A Social Capital Perspective on Parent-School Partnerships**

Coleman's (1988) extensive study of the social structure of parental ties and their influence on the creation of human capital gives us insight into the ways social capital is formed and benefits the actors. Coleman defines social capital by its function, whereby individuals form social relationships that give them access to various resources that were previously not at their disposal. He emphasizes the deliberate process of building social networks through changes in relations among persons that benefits those who participate in the process.

Coleman identifies three forms of social capital. The first is based on obligations, expectations, and trustworthiness of social structures where a benefit accrued by the first actor on the second builds up an obligation for the latter to return the favor to the former and simultaneously builds up a recurring expectation on the part of the first actor for the same. The success of this exchange is based on the trustworthiness of the social environment and the actual extent of obligations held, a higher level of obligation implying a greater amount of social capital. In a school environment, this kind of social capital can be observed within the organizations of parents where the parents have strong links with one another, forming a cohesive group, and also when parents and teachers share a high level trust that can benefit the school. Bryk and Schneider (2002) use Coleman's framework of social capital to draw our attention toward the social relationships at work in the school communities and how the nature of social exchanges between the principal, teachers, students, and parents can enhance the school's capacity to improve. Instead of affecting student learning directly, relational trust between the various stakeholders supports a set of conditions – some structural and some psychosocial – to make the environment more conducive to learning, ultimately leading to improved school productivity. Schools that have well-lubricated communication patterns between and among parental groups and teachers have higher relational trust, and this can act as social capital for the school (Bryk & Schneider).

The second form of social capital that Coleman (1988) identifies inheres in the information channels provided by a social network, that is, the use of social relations to access information that otherwise could be quite costly to access and share. Strong relationships between parents and school personnel can provide this kind of informational capital as they effectively share ideas about students that, in turn, can enhance their abilities to make decisions in the best interest of the students. By providing information to parents about the choice of curricula that their children should select, such social relationships can improve students' chances of future college access. These social ties can be of immense benefit, especially to those parents who have never been to college themselves and therefore lack the necessary information and expertise to aid their children in making effective curricular choices. Within the parental groups, members can share information about course offerings and the effectiveness of various teachers, thereby promoting college access for their children.

The third form of social capital inheres in the norms and effective sanctions adopted by members of a social network. Coleman (1988) emphasizes the use of some social norms, either internalized or rewarded, that can enhance certain actions. While acknowledging the importance of all types of social relations and social structures in facilitating social capital, Coleman identifies an important characteristic of social structure that facilitates social capital in the form of closure of social networks, or the level of interconnectedness of actors, which makes norms and sanctions effective. Coleman gives an example of intergenerational closure, wherein close ties between parents ensure effective monitoring of the children across several families. In addition, closure creates trustworthiness in the social structure (Coleman; Portes, 1998). One can therefore defend the effectiveness of this kind of social structure in cohesive parent groups that can benefit students. Applying the theory of social capital to schools, we can assume that stronger parental community participation can aid in human capital formation as intergenerational closure acts to maintain discipline and discourages deviant behavior among students, thus reducing dropout rates and improving the chances of college access, as Coleman's study on high schools reveals.

## **The Dark Side of Social Capital**

While social relationships within parent groups and between parents and schools have ostensible advantages as discussed above, there are somewhat under-recognized but equally germane drawbacks that need to be considered for developing a coherent understanding of parental social capital. This section

builds on cases where strong community ties have, in fact, reduced the autonomy of schools to undertake reforms. One such case was provided by the study on detracking efforts of some schools by Oakes (1985) and Oakes, Wells, Jones, and Datnow (1997). The practice of tracking in schools places students in various leveled tracks based on their merit. Oakes' study revealed major curricular differences across tracks. Students in the top tracks were being provided knowledge and skills that were highly valued in society and that would help them in seeking college or university admission, eventually giving them access to higher social and economic positions in the adult world. The difference in curricula also ensured that once placed in a lower track, a student would find it almost impossible to move to a higher track (Oakes, 1985). Subsequent efforts to remove the process of tracking in these schools were met with opposition from groups of powerful parents whose children were favored by the existing system of tracking. The socially powerful parents were motivated by their own self-interest in maintaining a system of meritocracy in which their children got the best deals in terms of quality of education and subsequent placement in higher social and economic positions in society (Oakes et al., 1997).

This case resonates closely with another study that looked at the negative effects of social capital (Portes, 1998), wherein members of a community enjoying the benefits of certain transactions, in this case better prospects for their children due to tracking mechanisms, excluded others from these benefits. Both these cases concur with Bourdieu's ideas of social capital in which social capital has a symbolic power that the dominant class invests in to maintain and reproduce group solidarity and to preserve the group's dominant position. Furthermore, to protect the group's social capital, access to its membership is closely monitored (Bourdieu, 1985). In the Oakes' et al. (1997) study, students from lower socioeconomic classes were increasingly being pushed into the lower track classes, and attempts by the school to include them within the mainstream curriculum by way of detracking were being subverted by the groups of powerful parents belonging to higher socioeconomic status groups. Oakes et al. observes that while one set of parents is quite vocal in making demands on the school, the opinions of parents of students who cannot make it to the higher tracks are hardly heard. Thus, one set of parents is rich in social capital by way of their cohesiveness and is dominant in making demands, whereas the other is impoverished.

Studies by Lareau (1987) and Lareau and Horvat (1999) on parental participation in schools provide interesting insights into the role played by social stratifications in parental participation and help us understand why some groups of parents are more vocal than others. Although these studies emphasize differences in cultural capital for different socioeconomic classes, one can discern a

parallel set of differences in the operation of the social capital of these various groups as well. In these studies, we see that even though the school teachers encouraged parental participation especially in reinforcing and monitoring the learning efforts of their children, participation by upper-middle-class parents was found to be higher both in terms of quality and quantity, whereas the working-class parents showed signs of discomfort in interacting with the same teachers. Furthermore, the working-class parents were also unfamiliar with the school's curriculum and the specific educational problems of their children. This difference in parents' participation could be attributed to differing educational capabilities and to differences in information about schooling. Most of the upper-middle-class parents had college degrees and considered themselves no less qualified than the teachers in handling the educational requirements of their children, even to the extent of criticizing and monitoring the teachers. Furthermore, they had more disposable income and flexible work schedules that constituted better material resources to have effective parent-school partnerships. On the other hand, most of the working-class parents were either high school graduates with no college experience or high school dropouts, and many had problems in school as children themselves. They had more faith in the teachers' abilities to guide their children, as they were not confident about their own abilities. Additionally, the upper-middle-class parents displayed strong intergenerational closure as these parents socialized a lot with other parents in the school community. As a result, they had extensive information about the classroom and school life of their children. Quite in contrast were the working-class parents who had close ties only with their own relatives in the area and almost no contact with other parents of the same school. Lareau's study clearly indicates the link between social class and parental participation. It also suggests that the kind of family-school relationship promoted by the schools currently benefits the richer families while devaluing the family-school relationships that the working class finds more comfortable.

Lareau and Horvat's (1999) case study of parental participation of Black parents in school activities shows a similar class-based effect whereby middle-class parents' cultural and social resources help the parents to comply with the dominant standards in school interaction, while types of parental participation that the teachers do not approve of are discouraged. Blacks, irrespective of social class, however, suffer from an additional lack of the valued cultural capital that Whites enjoy, resulting in better performance of White children in schools (Lareau & Horvat). These studies are in the tradition of Bourdieu, trying to explain unequal academic achievement and reproduction of social relationships (Bourdieu, 1985).

Another perspective is provided by Post's (1992) case study based in Joshua Gap, a small California town. Even though this study does not directly pertain to college access, it provides a good example of a situation where strong groups of parents have acted in unison to go against a school's policy. In this case the local school board's attempt to adopt a multicultural reading series was met with protests from a group of parents who demanded removal of the books. This community of parents sharing common interests felt that the series was against their perception of traditional family values and unpatriotic as the books were international in flavor. It was thus a concept of community constructed by some members who shared perceptions of what is right and what is wrong. On the other side of the conflict were the teachers and another set of parents who supported the introduction of the series. Both sets of parents, however, were from similar racial and socioeconomic backgrounds and were equally vocal in their demands. In this case, we observe how strong community ties may attempt to reduce the autonomy of the schools in the selection of curriculum, since the community did not perceive the change in the curriculum as appropriate. Parents may use their social capital to curb innovative efforts on the part of the school.

Post's (1992) case study is distinct and revealing compared with the earlier cases of detracking and class-based parental participation. In the detracking case reported by Oakes et al. (1997), one set of parents was more vocal than the others, while in the class-based parental participation studies done by Lareau (1987; Lareau & Horvat 1999), the upper-class parents were clearly in an advantageous situation as far as teachers' perceptions of parental participation were concerned. However, in Post's study, the two sets of parents with opposing views are equally vocal in their views. This is, in fact, an example of healthy parent-school partnerships; not only were all groups of parents equally active, but also their discordant voices were given equal importance by the school.

### **Illuminating the Dark Side of Social Capital: Setting an Informed Agenda for Schools**

The studies discussed above bring forth certain contradictions to the traditional wisdom that strong parental social capital can lead to positive outcomes for all students. Coleman's theory provides a functionalist approach towards viewing the positive outcomes of social capital, inhering from strong parental links with the schools. When he defines social capital, one of his basic assumptions is that "social capital is productive, making possible the achievement of certain ends that in its absence would not be possible" (Coleman, 1988, p. S98). The various studies discussed in the previous sections raise doubts about this

basic assumption. There is no doubt that Coleman's ideas about social capital have certainly been seminal in the understanding of parent-school dynamics. This article, while acknowledging the positive outcomes of social capital, tries to extend Coleman's work by developing boundary conditions to his theory whereby outcomes of social capital may not be positive for all stakeholders.

The next section examines how schools can play a role in facilitating the acquisition and control of scarce resources, such as higher track classes that lead to college access, and in enhancing the power to define and control the appropriate outcomes or function of schools. In view of a conflict approach to the social capital aspect of parental participation in schools, whereby the ends that different groups of parents are trying to achieve through strong social networks are not necessarily the same, I posit that schools need to be careful about the differential outcomes and should therefore take measures to improve the chances of college access for students of lower socioeconomic status.

### **Schools and the Mitigation of Selective Information Sharing**

The role of strong social networks in providing access to information was discussed in the first section. While some active parents, through strong ties with schools and intergenerational ties within parent groups, can benefit from information that can help their children gain access to colleges, other parents who do not possess such strong social capital can be at a disadvantage. Schools can, therefore, provide the underserved students with necessary information and tools essential for college access by creating and maintaining information channels between parents and teachers. In other words, schools can facilitate the formation of parental social capital especially for those groups that do not inherently enjoy the benefits of the dominant groups' cultural capital.

The Education Resources Institute (TERI) report (2004) found that students coming from disadvantaged racial and socioeconomic conditions are underserved by schools in the disbursal of college preparatory information and guidance. This report makes a strong case for providing extensive information to under-represented students and their families who may lack basic knowledge about the process necessary to gain access to college. According to this report, disbursal of the information should start as early as the child's 5<sup>th</sup> grade year and should include matching career interests with educational goals, describing the courses the students need for college admission, and explaining the availability of financial aid (Vargas, 2004). Unfortunately, the students who are most in need of such information are overly represented in schools where the student-to-guidance counselor ratio is very high, leaving very little time for the counselors to pay individual attention to these students. Whereas upper-middle-class and elite students under similar conditions can afford to

pay for counseling services offered at a price by private, independent educational consultants, thus managing their admission to good colleges, students coming from disadvantaged backgrounds have to rely more on their schools for similar services (Jun & Colyar, 2002; McDonough, 1994, 1997; Vargas). Such tendencies on the part of students coming from advantaged backgrounds can also increase competition for access to colleges, making it even more difficult for students who do not enjoy similar privileges.

Schools have the special responsibility of addressing the needs of disadvantaged students and families precisely because they lack social capital and also cannot buy expensive counseling services from outside. Because such students and families lack vital information about choice of curriculum and financial aid that might hamper their decision to enroll in college, schools ought to target these parents when disbursing information (MSEP, 2006). When parents know beforehand about the availability of financial aid and the residual expenses in colleges, they can start saving early on so that their children's educational aspirations do not suffer. Parents should also be provided with information about their children's progress and about academic course offerings so that from middle school on they can encourage their children to take the most challenging and useful courses to improve their chances of college access. Information must also be provided about college entrance examinations and navigating through the college admissions process. Disadvantaged students and their parents need to be encouraged to consider four-year colleges instead of just focusing on two-year colleges. To improve college access for these students, investments can be made to provide technological support to allow students to conduct college-related transactions over the internet (Epstein, 1992; Vargas, 2004).

Additionally, a major problem in college access for most students is the lack of connections between K-12 and post-secondary education systems. The sets of standards and coursework requirements are very different in the school system and the post-secondary education systems. As a result, many students and their parents do not know what is expected of students entering college, and these misunderstandings can, in turn, lead to poor preparation for college (Andrea, Kirst, & Antonio, 2004). In light of this finding, what is required is the building up of strong social networks between parents, schools, and post-secondary education systems. In such networks, schools will have to act as intermediaries between parents and colleges so that the students can benefit from such networks to improve their chances of college access.

### **Schools and the Equitable Disbursal of Scarce Resources**

Resources such as college preparatory classes and upper track classes are scarce, and typically they are distributed on the basis of academic merits of

the student. In this context, it is useful to invoke again the emphasis on social norms by Coleman (1988) in his discussion of the benefits of social capital. Social norms are either internalized or rewarded to enhance certain actions. While Coleman sees the usefulness and effective maintenance of social norms in reducing deviant behavior among students, social norms adopted by members of a social network need not always be beneficial for everyone in society. One can perceive a dark side of social norms in the acceptance and maintenance of the traditional ideology of merit through strong social capital that can be detrimental to students who do not necessarily display the kind of merit that is rewarded in society. The current ideology of merit uses conventional measures of academic success in determining who should have access to further educational opportunities, thus justifying uneven distribution of curriculum and teaching quality (Oakes, Rogers, Lipton, & Morrell, 2002). Therefore, using Coleman's idea of social norms, one can argue that the traditional ideology of merit has been internalized by parents as well as teacher groups, and it is akin to a well set grammar of schooling that is maintained and rewarded by the members of strong social networks of parents and teachers. The definitions of intelligence and merit that are socially constructed by such networks are so ingrained in the mindset of their members that they are perceived as common sense and hence not to be questioned or doubted (Oakes et al., 2002). In the process, while students of mainstream culture and middle-class status benefit from the resulting merit-based tracking, students coming from a lower socioeconomic background, whose parents are often at the periphery or outside the parent-school social network, are increasingly being represented in lower track classes (Oakes et al., 1997).

Yonezawa and Oakes (1999) make a case for restructuring access to information whereby educators are made aware of how they should respond to parents from different backgrounds. Their study shows that fixed policies become negotiable when advantaged parents lobby for better placement of their children, while disadvantaged parents never come to know why their children are offered certain courses and what implications that might have on their children's chance of making it to college. While on one side schools need to be strict with their fixed policies that should be universally adopted for all students irrespective of their race and socioeconomic status, disadvantaged parents need to be provided with extra information about courses, as these parents are generally isolated from better informed parental networks. Schools ought to provide special attention to characteristics that impede information flow, such as immigrant status, language barriers, single parenthood, and working situations of parents that might reduce their frequency of parent-school interactions; scarce guidance time and resources should be allocated accordingly.

Furthermore, schools can create supplemental mechanisms, such as tutoring and back-up classes, to help students who perform poorly instead of leaving them further behind (Auerbach, 2002; Jasis & Ordonez-Jasis, 2005; Lareau, 1987; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Yonezawa & Oakes).

Schools also need to acknowledge that parents who are not visible are not necessarily uninvolved. Rather, they motivate their children through their personal stories and other means (Auerbach, 2002). This aspect needs to be recognized, respected, and mobilized for the children's benefit. Such parents need to be reached, taken into confidence, and encouraged to participate by giving them honest information about school programs to reduce inequities. These initiatives can diminish parental skepticism and improve trust between parents and school authorities. At the same time, schools need to be vigilant about the ways in which some families are privileged. Sometimes upper-middle-class parents, in their zeal to "manage" the school careers of their children, may misuse their parental rights for hoarding the best classrooms and resources to the detriment of others. Instead, active and vocal parents should be encouraged to be advocates for all children, not just their own. Furthermore, students who do not have active parental advocates need to be heard and encouraged to speak up for themselves (Yonezawa & Oakes, 1999).

### **Schools and the Dispersion of Unequal Power**

Different groups of parents and other interested members in the school community, such as teachers and community members, may not share the same set of interests or visualize the same desirable ends. Thus, while Coleman (1988) recognizes the common goal of building a trustworthy social environment in school that is conducive to better student performance, there may be other, potentially conflicting goals and outcomes of schooling demanded by different sets of stakeholders. In earlier sections of this article, this argument was quite evident in the differing goals of parent and teacher groups in the Joshua gap incident in California (Post, 1992) and the detracking incident reported by Oakes (1985). In these situations, social capital was used as a tool for leveraging power to define the school's function, thus bringing forth the conflict aspect of social capital. It is not always a common goal that every interested member in the school community is pursuing; at times, the function of the school is constrained and strong social networks come into play to silence the voices of certain groups while the actions of others prevail.

In light of these arguments, the concept of school productivity and function can be reconstructed to include reaching out to and fostering relationships with parents in various groups. Schools need to organize parent groups and listen to them, empowering them. A healthy school environment can be promoted

by encouraging the empowerment of teachers, as well, instead of a traditional bureaucratic hierarchical system. Teacher empowerment can either be in the form of teacher professionalism (i.e., teacher-as-expert role) or in the form of promoting collaborative decision making among a group of educators. Parental empowerment can develop by parents exercising influence within a school, usually through decision-making forums (Bauch & Goldring, 1998). Policies could be developed to encourage parents to be partners in a collaborative environment through shared decision-making, establishing effective communication between all parents and acknowledging their diversity and differing needs, establishing programs at schools to enable parents to participate actively in their children's education, and connecting students and families with community resources to provide an enriching experience in education (Bauch & Goldring; Chrispeels, 1991). Local schools can thus emerge as a powerful vehicle for bringing together community members for the benefit of all, and this ability to link parents can be viewed as a positive attribute of the school. Correspondingly, schools that effectively foster social ties in their communities may be rewarded by provision of more resources.

Bauch and Goldring (1998) have examined four models of parent-teacher participation. Under a traditional or hierarchical mode, both parental and teacher participation are low and power is organized hierarchically. The teacher professionalism mode is marked by high teacher and low parental participation. Teachers view their knowledge base as a source of power while parents' voices are barely heard. Under the parental empowerment mode, parents are more powerful compared to teachers in influencing school processes and outcomes, and they act as advocates, activists, and/or vocal members of elected school councils. The fourth model is a partnership or communal mode, indicating dual empowerment of teachers and parents working together to develop learning and caring communities in schools. The first three models are fraught with risks of promoting unequal relationships. Thus, whereas too much teacher empowerment can lead to very little decision-making by parents regarding the education of their own children, too much parental empowerment can lead to the hijacking of decision-making roles by a small group of dominant parents that might lead to detrimental results, not just for some students, but also for teachers. However, dual empowerment of both parents and teachers, though running the risk of the politics of power, has a better chance of benefiting from the politics of partnership stressing equity and caring relationships (Bauch & Goldring; Epstein, 1993).

Auerbach's (2002) study makes a case for bringing together parents coming from disadvantaged backgrounds and actively listening to them instead of silencing or muting their voices in educational research. She identifies three

types of narratives from these parents: life stories of parents' own struggle with schooling as students, stories of bureaucratic rebuff in encounters with school staff as parents, and their counter-stories that challenge the official narratives of schooling. Auerbach helped organize monthly bilingual Futures and Families meetings in a school where parents were actively engaged in the college access programs of their children. Providing a platform for the parents to come together and share their stories helped previously isolated parents to build social networks and a sense of commonality in addition to improving their bargaining power to negotiate conflicts with their school. Thus, while such actions can help in parental empowerment, they can also help educators and researchers understand and affirm the cultural capital of these parents. Unlike the established views that disadvantaged parents do not bother about participating in school activities, their ideas of participation are quite different and need to be understood in order to establish effective parent-school partnerships (Auerbach; Jun & Colyar, 2002).

### **Moving Toward a New Framework for Examining Parental Participation**

The arguments presented above have important implications for society, as they imply that a set of parents, by way of their family-school relations and also by virtue of intergenerational ties, are more representative of the "community" that forms partnerships with schools in deciding what and how children should study. In other words, these parents decide the function of the school. Therefore, we are not talking about the entire community, but rather a clique of powerful parents whose social capital is highly valued in the system, much to the detriment of the under-represented social classes who, in most cases, are also the minority classes and races. Through densely interconnected networks, the powerful parental groups have, on the one hand, achieved enhanced social capital by helping and promoting the interests of their own children, and on the other, have created liabilities for other less privileged, under-represented parents by preventing the schools innovating and adopting broader and more equitable approaches to education for the benefit of all children.

As a result, instead of seeing "parents" as a single homogenous group whose participation is seen as desirable by schools, society needs to adopt a framework that examines how the intersections of multiple social relationships are constructed to produce equities or inequities (Knight & Oesterreich, 2002). As highlighted in the previous sections, policymakers also need to be aware of the intersections of parents' socioeconomic status, majority/minority status, language, and single-parent status. This is especially important because different

parent groups also represent different cultural and social capital; instead of being seen as deficiencies, their unique characteristics and backgrounds ought to be understood and incorporated as familial strengths in the models of parental participation in schools (Knight & Oesterreich).

At the level of the school, however, the task of empowering parents belonging to lower socioeconomic status and/or racial and ethnic minority groups is not an easy task, given the fact that teachers and administrators are subject to manipulation by powerful cohesive groups of privileged parents. Schools can start by making initiatives that would benefit the lower-class students without harming the upper-class students, such as disbursing information about various courses and college access. These actions need to specially target students and parents belonging to low socioeconomic status. An exemplary program working towards this end is the Math/Science Equity Program, a collaborative effort among parents, researchers, educators, and community activists. The program aims at reducing academic disparities between African American and White students in math and science course enrollments and at enhancing parental involvement by informing parents about their rights in public education, encouraging networking among parents within schools and communities, and highlighting the importance of higher level math and science courses for the future success of the students (MSEP, 2006).

Furthermore, schools can become more appreciative of the subtle and different ways parents participate, especially parents of lower socioeconomic status, instead of seeing them as being deficient in providing aspiration and help to their children. There are definite advantages in involving parents in school activities according to the social capital theory. In fact, according to Epstein (1992), there is increasing evidence that family and school partnership practices are more important for children's success than family structures, such as race, socioeconomic class, level of parent education, marital status, language of family, family size, or the age of the child. The more intense the school-family partnership, the less influence the above-mentioned factors have on children's academic success.

However, it is also important to realize that any parental body is not a homogenous group without a name or a face. Rather, parents from a variety of backgrounds need to be recognized, and their needs should be served. Often parents coming from disadvantaged backgrounds are lesser participants in school activities, leading to the general opinion that they are not interested or that they do not care about their children's success. Instead of blaming these parents and seeing deficits in their social capital, policymakers need to make policies that would strengthen the social networks of these underprivileged parents and make them equal partners in their children's success in education.

Educators need to be sensitive to the needs of these parents instead of seeing them as a burden. On the other hand, in light of scarce resources, schools need to be careful that such resources are not hijacked by better “connected” upper-middle-class parents to the detriment of other children in the schools.

The need to involve diverse parent groups is even more crucial in the present scenario of increased globalization. The United States and many other developed countries are becoming more multicultural, multiethnic, and multiracial. The constructed community needs to represent and appreciate this variety as its strength; only then will the dark side of social capital be fully illuminated and schools and students be able to reap the benefits of greater parental and community participation in schools. Parent-school relationships indeed offer a forked road for policymakers and educators.

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